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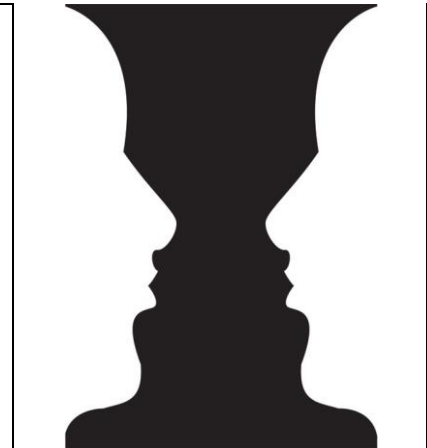
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(Re)telling a dog story from Newfoundland: Voice, alterity and the art of ethnographic description

John Harries¹

Abstract

This paper addresses the question of how and why we (anthropologists and sociologists) tell stories of real people doing real stuff. It will consider this question by reflecting on three versions of a story that I have carried with me and told in variety of contexts over a couple of decades. The story is not mine but was originally told to me by a man while I was visiting a village on the coast of Newfoundland, Canada. In (re)telling three versions of this story I will be focusing on the problem of “voice” and how the voice of the other is constituted. In answering the question of how and why we tell tales of the field, I will suggest that we do so in part so other people, other voices, come to inhabit our accounts thereby rendering them “ethnographic.” The paper will conclude by arguing that our finely detailed accounts play a crucial role in both constituting the authoritative voice of the anthropologist and troubling this voice with the ghostly whispers of other voices which inhabit our narratives even if, as is the way with ghosts, they can never be wholly conjured into full presence and complete intelligibility.

Keywords

Narrative, voice, ethnography, Newfoundland, description, evocation

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Introduction

As ethnographers, Ruth Behar writes, we “are expected to travel somewhere, even if that somewhere is a return trip to a lost home, but always with the commitment to bring back a story.” (2003:21) We bring these stories back and present them to some audience or another as “tales of the field”. (Van Maanen 1988) But what are these stories doing? Why do we tell them at all? And what, in fact, are we doing when we say that we are telling “stories about real people and real places.” (Behar 2003:16)

The processes of entextualisation is, it is argued, inherently political in that it (almost) inevitably gives the anthropologist, as the writer, some quality of power over the people who become the people written about. We are no longer writers of factual descriptions of stuff that really happened; rather we compose our facts in writing and, in so doing, commit of an act of “symbolic violence” by constituting others as *others* within a project of knowledge “based on empirical difference and discursive hierarchy.” (Hastrup 1992:123, cf. Jackson 1987:11-12)

Our narratives are also political in the sense that we are actively and self-consciously making choices concerning how we write our stories we other lives. These choices are informed not only by the ambition to be as “truthful” as possible but by a myriad of ethical and theoretical considerations that have emerged from and are enfolded into the self-reflexive critique of ethnography as a political project. We are tellers of tales sure enough, but now that the “mirror of man” has cracked and we have partly disavowed the “doctrine of immaculate perception” (Van Maanen 1988:73) so acknowledging that the tales we tell are partial, and constructed, we have come to consider how we fashion our tales and in this fashioning constitute different stories for different purposes.

With this in mind I wish to revisit a story that was told many years ago and has been told many times in the years that followed. This story was first told to me and some others many years ago while sitting around a kitchen table in Codroy Newfoundland. The teller was, or is, a man named Alan and story is about how he came to shoot his favourite hunting dog.

Actually, in truth, I will not be revisiting this story (for that story is gone, a problem which I will return to throughout this paper) but rather three versions of this story, each somewhat different from the other, that I have told over the years. The first, and most recent, is a version of the story I told during a lecture to undergraduate students at the University of Edinburgh, the second, much older, is a version of a paper which I presented at a seminar when I first came to Edinburgh as a postgraduate. The third, is the version I recorded in my fieldnotes some short time after Alan told this story.

By revisiting these stories, and exploring the dissonance between the different versions of this story, my intention is to consider the question of how I compose the voice of another person and, in composing this voice as speaking through me, do the necessary violence that, if Hastrup is correct, inheres in the work of ethnographic writing. In asking this question, I am evoking the original, perhaps naively realistic, concern with representation as having to do with the quality of relationship between our

writing (and speaking) of a story and the event of which we write and speak. Yet, in shifting this to a question of voice and the way others' voices inhabit our texts and presentations, I am steering away from resolving concern with representation into a problematic of accuracy. The issue is not one of the degree to which you can trust my version of events as a more or less faithful account of what *really* happened (though this is an issue as well, as the differences between the various versions of the story reveal). My concern is, rather, one of how others come to be present in our accounts even as they are, self-evidently, absent.

In the George Square Lecture Theatre, University of Edinburgh, March 13th, 2013

The room is indeed a theatre with raised stage running nearly the width of the room and row upon row of seats rising away. At the left hand corner of the stage, if you take the position of the performer facing the audience, there is a lectern with a computer and buttons to control sound, lights and the projector suspended high above. It is one o'clock in the afternoon. I sit behind the lectern, and wait for the room to fill. Students flow up the aisles and into the seats. Maybe there are around three hundred people, maybe more.

I wander to the centre of the stage. I speak of what this lecture and the next will be about: ethnography, the problem of representation and interpretation and so on. In my hand is this little black clicky-thing to advance the slides of the PowerPoint presentation. Click. Next slide. It reads "Dog Stories". The words are imposed on a photograph of grey fenced fields, white houses, a barn, and beyond black spruce-wooded hills beneath a grey sky.

In front of this picture I start telling the story of Alan's story. I recorded the lecture and the passages quoted here are a slightly edited version of what I said:

That's, um, a picture of Codroy, Newfoundland, which is a small village on the southwest coast of Newfoundland where I did my first, and really rubbish, ethnographic fieldwork. I was young. I was shy. It was a small community. People were, um, difficult in many ways.

Click. I change the slide again. The heading of the next slide reads "FIELDNOTES from WESTERN HARBOUR (6/11/1990). Beneath this heading is an edited version of my fieldnotes. I carry on speaking.

Anyway. This took place in Russell's kitchen alright. Ah, his common-law partner Mary was out so Russell and the "boys", as they would say in Newfoundland, were having a bit of a "time" – see what anthropologists do by the way, it's pretty good – having a bit of time, as they say in Newfoundland, or coming around, drinking a few beer and they were telling stories. And this is the field-notes I wrote later that night. But I'm going to tell the story in my own way. And basically the story goes like this:

So this guy called Alan So he told this story, uh, and this was about his dog. And he claimed that this was the most wonderful dog he had ever had. She was the most wonderful dog. She was a wonderful water dog. Anyway, ah, "what a water a dog", he said. "She'd go into anything", right, this Golden Labrador.

It was a really long story, but then he comes to the point where the dog's back is broken because it was hit by a truck. It breaks the dog's back. But the dog is such a wonderful dog, so faithful and dedicated to its dog work, going into the water, that still this dog, even though she was pregnant, would follow him, would follow him down to the beach willing to do the work for him, with him, that she always did, going into the water after ducks. Following him down to the beach she came to a log and she couldn't get over the log. And finally he made the decision to shoot her. He said this was the hardest thing he ever had to do was to shoot this dog. It is a bit Old Yeller, for those who like veteran Disney movies. But the hardest thing he ever had to do was to ... shoot ... that ... dog.

But why tell this story to this crowd of several hundred students, restless, bored and attentive? I told this story because, of course, I wanted to make a point that had something to do with the problem of representation and the relationship between what *really* happened and my understanding of the significance of what really happened. As I said in the lecture:

I'm going to come back to this story on Tuesday. But that's it. We're going to leave that story just now. That is a story that I have just told. That is a story that exists in field-notes. That is something that really happened. And come Tuesday I am going to discuss how this something that has really happened can be transformed into anthropological knowledge; into knowledge of other people's cultures; into the webs of meaning they themselves have spun; into an understanding of the native's point of view. And whether that is valid or legitimate, or how we secure the validity and legitimacy of that.

Click. Next slide. A photograph of an anthropologist in the field, pale and white standing beside his African compatriots. Some, including the anthropologist, are holding spears. "Spot the anthropologist" I say as a lame joke. I have used this joke for years. I don't even know who this anthropologist is or the people standing beside him, but the joke works, a bit. Click. Next slide. "ETHNOGRAPHY DEFINED".

In the seminar room, some time I am not sure when, maybe it was the spring of 1992

The circumstances around the creation and speaking of this version of the story of Alan's story are only vaguely recalled. I kept no record of these days. No diary. No recordings. Not that many photographs even. The old 3 1/2" hard disks with bits and pieces of unfinished writing have mostly long been thrown away. But I have copied and kept the text from which I believe I read when presenting my first seminar as a post-graduate student during my first year of study at The University of Edinburgh. This could have been in the autumn of 1991, more likely, it being my first year, it would have been the spring of 1992.

Assuming the long retained text is what I spoke from, this is more or less what I would have said on that day:

Silent the village had lain sleeping. The barking of a dog, the swish of a truck passing up the road to the highway, a neighbour pushing wet logs up onto his wood pile, a raven dropping down the wind, black in the grey breathless day, all sounds and sights had only added to the sense of quiet, giving counterpoint, giving shape to the passage of minutes and hours.

And all day Russell had sat alone by the kitchen window. He sat and drank, and watched the silent day make its way towards night.

By late afternoon Frank and Alan had joined Russell at the kitchen table. The three of them sat at the table and drank beer that the visitors had brought with them, and later I joined them, having intruded on the pretence of making myself a cup of tea, and staying on when offered a beer.

The small white puppy of the house, who had been sleeping like a stone behind the wood-stove, woke and came waddling and whining around the feet of the men. Alan picked it up, cradling it on its back and scratching its near hairless belly. He spoke to the dog as one would a baby: "You're some cute pup aren't you eh? Some cute." Then, placing it back on the floor, he grabbed at the dog's face and tail until it growled and snapped at the man's hand. "Oh yeah, you're some fierce. Russell gonna teach you to go moosin'? Yes he is. Oh you're some fierce."

Then, as if making apology for his weakness, Alan spoke to the rest of us, "God, I really love pups you know, love 'em." He had three dogs himself, his favourite was a Golden Labrador retriever. "She's some water-dog my son, she'll go into anything.

God I loved that dog. She'd go into anything. I remember her going into the water in March. There was still ice on the water and in she went. What a dog."

There was a slight pause, and then Alan launched into the story of the mother's, the great dog's, death. "I finally had to shoot her, you know, had to do it, God that was hard." His voice was still now, not really sad, but thoughtful.

"You know Tommy's old green truck, that truck he had before he bought the Chev. Yeah, well she was up on the road by Cyril's and he hit her, went right over the small of her back. She couldn't move her back legs, she was, you know, paralyzed, and she was pregnant with a litter of pups then too. So I put her on the porch and fed her and stuff. And um . . .

I went down duck huntin', down on the beach there just past the point. I was goin' down on the trike, and looked in back of me and there she was followin' me, just draggin' herself along with her two front legs and followin' the trike to the shore. I got down to the blind, and I saw her comin' down onto the beach. And there was this big log lyin' on the beach, this big piece of drift-

wood, and she got to it and tried to get over, and she just couldn't, she just couldn't do it.

So finally I had to take her back home. I put her on the trike and took her back and put her in the shed.

And she was pregnant with them pups. For four days she tried to have them pups, but she couldn't do it, she was paralyzed you know, she just couldn't do it. If there was a vet maybe I coulda saved the pups, but after four days she was in such pain, I had to shoot her. She just was in too much pain. Took my forty-eight, she didn't feel a thing.

God that was hardest thing I ever had to do: shootin' that dog."

There followed my interpretation of this story and its significance. You see, as I explained to my fellow students back those many years ago and to a lecture hall full of students many years later, in this village dogs and men were in some ways thought to be similar. Dogs were companions to men, in that they join men in doing male things: hunting moose and ducks, hauling wood and so on. More than this, however, dogs and men were valued in the same way. Dogs were not house pets. They were valued as working animals and the work they were valued for was working in the woods and on or in the water.

So it was with men like Russell, Fred and Alan. They did not hang around the house except to eat, drink and swap stories. They worked in the woods and water and it was for that work they valued each other and themselves. These men did not go on about what a good father they were, or even how much money they made working at this or that job. They bragged about shooting, about finding their way in the woods and surviving stormy seas. So it made sense for men to brag about the virtues of their dogs because this was much the same as bragging about oneself and one's manly accomplishments.

The thing was, however, that this field of manly accomplishment, the art of fashioning a livelihood from the sea and forest, was increasingly an anachronism, made so by diminishing returns, increasing regulation and the "modernisation" of the economy of rural Newfoundland. So even as they sat and talked of their prowess as hunters and fishers Russell, Fred and Alan were increasingly, useless. The story of the shooting of one's favourite dog was, therefore, also and more profoundly a story of imperilled male identity. I concluded this long-ago seminar with the following words:

There were no happy endings to these stories, for it seems there was no happy ending to the situation that the men of this village found themselves in. To shoot the beloved dog, to shoot it as one would a useless animal, was finally the greatest tragedy, "the hardest thing I ever had to do," as Alan said, because it was to metaphorically kill one's own sense of self as a man.

Of course, as I pointed a few hundred undergraduate students many years later, Alan likely would likely not have thought his story to carry this metaphorical weight. This was, finally, the story of the shooting of his favourite dog. But the art of the anthropologist, as I understood it, was to fashion a plausible interpretation of this story,

made plausible through the work of “thick description”, which meant this story came to exceed itself and hold within it a far greater truth.

In a house in Codroy on the southwest coast of the island of Newfoundland 1990

Before I came to Edinburgh I was a student of folklore at The Memorial University of Newfoundland in St. John's. As a folklore student I decided on a project that, mostly by chance, took me to Codroy, a village by the sea at the end of the valley of the Codroy River on the southwest coast of the island.

I visited Codroy on and off for about a year, staying a week or two, maybe three and then heading back to St. John's. The last visit I stayed with a couple named Mary and Russell and their two young daughters. I had met Mary on a previous visit and they had a bit of space in the loft of their little white house and needed the cash, so they took in the folklorist as a lodger. I stayed about two weeks, spending my time hanging around the fish-processing plant and the Islandview Lounge and the kitchen of the little white house. People came and went. They would come in without knocking, speaking up as they opened the door, saying “hey anyone in”, or something like that. If there was someone in then the visitor be made welcome and would stay for a while, sitting at the kitchen table, drinking tea or beer and talking of this and that. The story of the death of the good dog came from one such visit.

The entry in my field-notes begins:

Nov-06-90:

Again this is being written the day after and under the slight influence of a hangover, which dims my memories of the night past, anyway the good news is that my decision to hang out and meet people seems to be working, one of the guys last night gave me his number and should be good to interview, now if I can remember what was said, in the natural context as we would have it, then I would be laughing (this morning the seventh the winter has come grey and howling snow still comes down driven by a westerly wind), anyway here goes.

There follows some description of the context – the kitchen, the appearance of the visitors, the preliminary chat and introductions – as well as my attempt to piece together the talk of the night before which had ranged widely over many topics – smoking dope, the fishery, moose-hunting, some jokes and songs and, of course, dogs. The bit of my fieldnotes in which I relate Alan's dog story is the same text that many years later appeared on the third slide of my lecture many years later.

Click. The heading of the next slide reads “FIELDNOTES from WESTERN HARBOUR (6/11/1990).

Alan was entertaining the puppy and commenting all the time on how much he loved pups, he talked of his own dogs (he had three) particularly a golden Labrador, "but what a water dog, my son, she'll go into anything" and launched into a very long story of

the dog's mother "you know tommy's old green truck well she was on the road up by someplace and she ran right over the small of her back, and then there was a middle part where he went out to hunt duck down by someplace else, and she somehow followed the trike dragging herself along on her two front paws till she got to the shore, and has he went down to the duck blind she tried to follow but couldn't get over a log, and finally he had to take her home, and she was pregnant and for four days the crippled dog tried to have her pups but she couldn't do it, if there had been a vet they could have maybe saved the pups, but finally after the four days she was in such pain he had to shoot here, "was the hardest thing I ever did in my life shooting that dog".

Oft told tales of the field and the intimate art of interpretation

As anthropologists we tell stories which are often based upon our being there and, to a lesser or greater extent, sharing in the lives of other people. Our ethnographic accounts, taken as whole, could be, as Edward Bruner suggests, considered as narratives, in the sense that they have a certain conventional form, a plot arch of sorts and an "implicit narrative structure" (Bruner 1997: p.264) which both shapes and is revealed in our written works.

These big narratives are populated by smaller stories, which relate the unfolding of specific goings on in real time. Paloma Gay y Blasco and Huon Wardle call these smaller stories "narratives of the immediate", the notion of immediacy suggesting that one quality that distinguishes these stories is that they communicate (and perhaps are predicated upon) "the condition of being ... in direct relation or connexion with something or somebody else." (2007:78) Narratives of the immediate may take different forms and deploy different "stylistic devices" but they all "share a focus on the nitty-gritty of human existence and a close attention to detail in the way social life is portrayed." (2007:78)

The question is why do we tell certain stories (and presumably not tell others)? In my case why has this story about a the death of good dog had such durability, such persistence, when other tales told on that evening have never been repeated by me in writing (beyond my fieldnotes) or while speaking during a seminar or lecture.

Gay y Blasco and Wardle hint at an answer to this question. We tell certain stories because they enable us to say certain things which exceed and yet are somehow immanent within our "narratives of the immediate" and so secure our grander, more theoretically, inclined statements as being emergent from, and so grounded in, the "direct connexion with something or somebody else." (Gay y Blasco and Wardle 2007:78) For Gay y Blasco and Wardle our stories of real events "form the building blocks from which conclusions about the quality of social life among a particular group or groups are built and they are shaped by the ethnographer to illustrate, support and in fact lead to these conclusions" (Gay y Blasco and Wardle 2007:84).

Martyn Hammersley takes a similar line of argument, suggesting that the role of "descriptions of single and relatively small scale phenomena" (1988) is to support the more general claims we make concerning the social life of others. As a realist (of a more

sophisticated sort) he asserts that these descriptions should be treated as “evidence”. As such we must consider two things when reading the true stories that ethnographers tell. Firstly, we must consider whether story is plausible and therefore whether the account we are reading is more or less a faithful representation of real events that happened before and beyond writing. Secondly, we must consider the quality of the relationship between these real events, as they are related in writing, and the more general propositions we are advancing. (cf. Hammersley 1998:58-77; 1992)

So, when it comes to Alan’s dog story, would be: 1. Are my various descriptions of the conversation on that night credible and plausible?, and 2. Do these descriptions support my more general claim that in Codroy there was a pervasive sense that the traditional modes of livelihood in which men made themselves useful were disappearing and that this had precipitated a rather mute crisis of masculine identity (which finds expression otherwise, including in the telling of stories about shooting ones favourite dog)? Actually, the tradition of interpretive ethnography makes this second question more complex. In my seminar paper I was not just using this story as evidence which, along with other bits of quotes and descriptions, allowed me to fashion and advance more general claims concerning imperilled masculine identity in rural Newfoundland. I was arguing that these more general claims inhabited this story, inhabited Alan’s words, and so in telling of how he came to shoot his beloved dog he was also speaking my interpretation of the significance of his words.

This is what makes the story of a good dog a story worth telling. It has the capacity to speak to more than what is being said and so can through the ethnographer’s magic, a tricky but often elegant verbal sleight of hand, allow our understandings of the lives of others to inhabit those lives and so our “narratives of the immediate” become revealed to have been about something else, even as that something else is constituted after the events being narrated (which are, if our descriptions are taken to be at all plausible and credible, always and necessarily prior to our interpretation of the significance or meaning of these events, just as November the 5th 1990 precedes whenever it was 1992, which precedes March the 13th 2014).

There is, of course, a clear and problematic ambiguity in this way of writing the voice of another so it comes to speak, or be inhabited by, our interpretations of what we think, maybe for good and well-argued reasons, is being said. The ambiguity lies in the question of who is actually speaking when other people speak in our narratives of the immediate. The obvious answer, and one in keeping a crude version of the anti-realist critique, would be that it is clearly I who is “speaking” in these various texts, whether they be fieldnotes, a seminar paper presented before my fellow postgraduates. Alan’s voice, if it ever was something other than my voice, is long gone.

Yet, there is the matter of quotations marks. Both in speaking and writing I indicate that there are words other than my own, words spoken before now (even as they are spoken now), words that come from way back when, from Alan speaking on that night. Two quotes in particular survive only slightly changed through all three versions of this story: “what a water dog”, said Alan, “my son, she’ll go into anything” and “that was the hardest thing I ever did in my life shooting that dog”. Each time these

are presented as *his* words, spoken before any of my speaking, with me coming after to record these words and then give these words significance depending on my purpose. So even in speaking I am marking out that there is voice other than my own which precedes my voices as *other*, as reality, as evidence, even as my interpretation comes to precede this voice, encompass it, render it articulate and so make this story, whoever's story it is, worth telling.

This is, moreover, not just a matter of the quotation marks which indicate these passages to be a voice other than my own. These words are different, marked out to be so by the way I write or perform these words. I have done this by trying to, rather clumsily, convey something of the sound of the language as it is spoken. In the text of my seminar paper I do this by dropping a few "g"s at the end of words and introducing some commonplace contractions that mark speech out as other than the "academic" voice that is building up the thick description and so composing an interpretation of this story as meaningful: "Oh yeah," says Alan as he plays with the little white pup "you're some fierce. Russell gonna teach you to go moosin'?", that kind of thing (or kinda thing). I do the same while speaking my lecture. When I come to the bits which I present in quotation marks, I speak more quickly and my voice slightly more guttural as if coming from the back of my throat, and so I crudely mimic the stereotypically rendered voice of a rural Newfoundlander. In this way another voice intrudes, dropping its g's, speaking more thickly and quickly, thereby announcing itself as being someone else from somewhere else other than the here and now.

But of course this is all nonsense. I am doing nothing but evoking the voice of another through some poor art of mimicry. This voice I fashion is, I would assume, nothing like Alan's voice. This is me performing, acting the part of another and so assimilating that other into the interpretive or pedagogical story I am creating. I draw attention to this very fact at the beginning of the lecture, before I even get to Alan's voice, by setting the scene using a couple of localisms – "boys" (referring to a group of grown men) and "time" (referring to any party-like gathering) – each spoken in my parody of a Newfoundland accent: "This took place in Russell's kitchen alright. Ah, his common-law partner Mary was out so Russell and the "boys", as they would say in Newfoundland, were having a bit of a "time." Then I take a step outside this other in-quotation-marks voice and reveal it to be a trick, a play at constituting difference by taking on the voice of another: "see what anthropologists do", I say, "it's pretty good" (this spoken in a flat tone which, coupled with the adjective "pretty", is how I, in my Maritime Canadian way, suggest ambivalence – it may be good or may actually be the opposite of good). In the end then, even as I mark out a different voice with quotation marks, dropped "g"s, contractions and a rough approximation of a another way of speaking, this voice, and so the very appearance of difference within my narration, is of my own making. See what anthropologists do.

This problematic ambiguity of who is speaking has been noted before with particularly reference to Geertz's interpretation of the Balinese cockfight (cf. Parker 1985; Schneider 1987). Jonathan Spencer, for one, takes Geertz to task for allowing "less and less space ... for readers to agree or disagree or make their own connexion" (1989:

147) between various stories told by various people from a plurality of perspectives. For Spencer this space is constituted in the difference between interpretation and description, where the latter takes the form of “rich and specific representations” which seem akin to Gay y Blasco and Wardle’s “narratives of the immediate” or Hammersley’s “descriptions of single and relatively small scale phenomena.” Figured as forms of writing, this is the distinction between the “high literary gloss of Geertz’s ethnography” and the (presumably) “more mundane jottings in his notebooks.” (Spencer 1989: 148) The problem with Geertz, according to Spencer, is that his version of ethnography “is, from notebook to monograph, a seamless web of interpretation.” (1989:150) It would be better, Spencer suggests, following Dan Sperber, to make this stitching visible and in so doing allow for the possibility that the reader attends to something, some event, a voice, or discordant cacophony of voices, that is at once that which we interpret yet is also other than our interpretations.

It seems for Spencer this is to be found in our fieldnotes. He allows that the fieldnotes are self-evidently writings and so interpretations of a sort, but they are interpretations that are closer to the real thing, the other which precedes and comes into writing. “One may not inscribe raw discourse”, he argues, “but one does take down a lot of quotes, explications, constructions and any half-decent fieldworker has some idea of who it is who has provided the quote, explication, or whatever.” (1989:148) Fieldnotes have, therefore, a quality of immediacy which, although they may not be “raw” are not as “cooked” as latter interpretations. This quality of immediacy seems, for Spencer, to be almost visceral, felt in the very grubby chaotic quality of writing our “entries in sweaty notebooks” (1989:148) which somehow is an extension of the experience of being there amongst others. After all, as Spencer points out, we don’t just sit around and write, we also “wade into paddy fields, get sick and read bad novels rather than confront another day of mounting misapprehension” (1989:160) and in general go about the wonderful, tedious and enlightening experience of trying to share and so know something of the lives of others.

Fieldnotes are, Spencer would seem to suggest, closer to that experience. They are writings sure enough but, they are writings which bear the trace of the condition of immediacy, the fact of their being made in the midst of being with others (as we, hung-over from too much beer, write our recollections in a nest of bedding and dirty clothes in the loft of small house with the noises of the family beneath) and so suggest even in a visceral felt way the absent presence of another, which includes that other which is our own self back then.

The critique of the seamlessness of Geertz’s ethnographic writing speaks to a more general concern with the “monologic” or “univocal” nature of ethnographic accounts (cf. Tedlock 1979, 1987; Tyler 1987; Crapanzano 1990), at least those written within “modernist” and “realist” traditions of scholarship. Drawing theoretical inspiration from writing of Mikhail Bakhtin, this line argument posited that “dialogic processes proliferate in any complexly represented discursive space” (Clifford 1986: p.15) including those of ethnographic research. The strategies of realist ethnographic writing close this space down, rendering our accounts of cock fights and dog stories

“monologic” in that they are “dominated by the voice of the privileged narrator” (Atkinson 1992: p.40). To use the language employed by Spencer, description effectively becomes interpretation with the result that other voices which exceed (even as they inhabit) our writings are banished from our accounts. What we are left with are authoritative totalities that, at least within themselves, suggest no possibility of difference except that which constituted within the horizon of our own interpretations and so recognised as a difference that can always be assimilated, as if in advance, into those interpretations. To put this more prosaically, the problem with acknowledging that the “narratives of the immediate” that populated our texts (and seminar presentations and lectures) are, even as Gay y Blasco and Wardle suggest, “shaped by the ethnographer to illustrate, support and in fact lead to” our “conclusions”, is that these stories cannot then do otherwise. In the stories I tell, Alan says what I need him to say. That is why this story is particularly story-worthy.

Yet, the critics of the grand traditions of realist ethnographic writing have suggested that we can do otherwise in our writing. Our accounts of other lives need not be monologic or univocal. This possibility has found expression more “experimental” ethnographic writing that have sought to avoid the interpretive closure that has rendered conventional ethnographic accounts univocal. The form of these experiments is various, from self-reflexive explorations of ethnographic “I” (Ellis 2004; Reed-Danahay 1997), to playful corruptions of modernist forms of ethnographic writing that exposed the constructed, partial and contingent nature of our texts, to attempts to eschew interpretation altogether by simply presenting “descriptions”, often in the form of lightly edited transcripts of conversations with informants (Dwyer 1999; Crapanzano 1980).

Given this diversity it would be risky to say what, if anything they have in common, other than a commitment to undoing more traditional forms of ethnographic authority, but certainly this extended “experimental moment in the human sciences” (Marcus and Fischer 1986) has re-emphasised the importance of “narratives of the immediate” or “descriptions of single and relatively small scale phenomena” within our scholarship. This is part perhaps because we have become more self-conscious about the how and why we fashion the tales of the field which populate our more theoretical descriptions of other cultures and societies. There is, however, more to it than that. The stories we tell are no longer simply evidence or descriptions which are enrolled seamlessly into our “conclusions about the quality of social life among a particular group”; rather, even as Spencer suggests, they also and otherwise allow for the possibility there being another, whose voice both speaks our interpretations and yet undoes them even in the speaking.

Descriptive excess and other voices

How is it then that this voice, which is both constituted in writing, yet comes in advance of this constitution so inhabiting our texts from without? Gay y Blasco and Wardle’s discussion of “narratives of the immediate” suggests one possibility. They briefly reflect on a passage from *Veiled Sentiments* (1986), Lila Abu Lughod’s ethnography of the emotional lives of Awlad 'Ali Bedouins in Egypt. This is particularly vivid descriptive

account of a man's wife deserting him and him, to the irritation of his family, begging her to return. The authors concluded that "Abu-Lughod uses anecdotes to build up a sense of, a *feel* for, the morality of the Awlad 'Ali, the morality of the Awlad 'Ali that enables engagement with that material on an emotive, imaginative level." (2007:88) They go on to suggest that an "emotionally and imaginatively compelling description ... furthers and facilitates a convincing interpretation" (ibid). Although this is quite right, I would also wish to argue otherwise: that vivid and compelling quality of this description does something additional to and other than furthering and facilitating our interpretations.

The key to this is the notion that in writing our descriptions of specific events we are enabling "engagement" with something "at an emotional, imaginative level." This quality of engagement inheres in the notion of immediacy as the "direct connexion with something or someone else" that Blasco and Wardle, and in a different register Spencer, suggest to be the hallmark of ethnographic description. There is, in other words, an affective quality to our "narratives of the immediate" which does not resolve itself into interpretation or conclusions, but rather evokes the absent presence of something else that is at once in the text and yet more than the text.

The question of course who or what is this something else? Gay y Blasco and Wardle evade this question when referring to "that material", making it unclear whether the "material" is something or someone else (a bereft Rashid begging his wife to return perhaps) or the story we tell of these events, or the interpretation which precedes and follows that story (the morality of the Awlad 'Ali). Spencer, makes matters a bit clearer when he suggests that in our fieldnotes, we find a record of "who has provided the quote, explication, or whatever", thereby allowing for the possibility that our descriptive writings move people to *feel* closer to that other *who*, some time ago, did or said something, which, through our fieldnotes, found its way into our writings, seminar presentations and lectures.

In placing the emphasis on evocation I am evoking the writings of Stephen Tyler, who in a series of chapters and articles argued for a "post-modern" ethnography that preferred the "evocation" rather than "description" of other lives. "A post-modern ethnography", according to Tyler, "is a cooperatively evolved text consisting in fragments of discourse intending to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality, and those provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect." (1986:125) There is something interesting in Tyler's notion that we renounce any pretence to description within the realist tradition. In particular what intrigues is the suggestion that our accounts should not, perhaps cannot, aspire to the interpretive closure which travels variously under the name of "conclusions" or "understanding"; rather our prose should evoke a difference that does not come into understanding and should do so by allowing for "polyphony and perspectival relativity" (1987:139) which troubles our interpretations even as we write them into being.

What concerns me about this version of postmodern ethnography is, however, the renunciation of description; for by renouncing description Tyler renounces the other that precedes the text, the *who*, which is just before our fieldnotes (but not *in* our

fieldnotes). He is perhaps right to argue that it is absurd to “describe” a “culture” or a “society” (1986: 130), but is it similarly absurd to tell a story describing how, one night many years ago, a man called Alan told the story of how he had to shoot his favourite dog? If there is anything that marks out ethnographic writing it is that it is, and has been, troubled by other voices that are before and beyond that writing. This is why we wade into muddy paddy fields or sit around kitchen tables in out-of-the-way Newfoundland villages – to invite just such trouble. In our tales of the field we are, as suggested in the introduction, trying to represent something beyond our text, beyond our writing. If we are given to a postmodern turn, we may be uncomfortable with the notion of origins, yet we do have to allow for a notion of difference, of alterity, that inhabits our text from without.

What I wish to argue, therefore, it is our “descriptions of single and relatively small scale phenomena” that we evoke the “immediacy” of another who we bring into understanding but is never understood. Our attempts to write and speak the voice of this other are clear and obvious failures, which at best are sincere though often a bit foolish, but these attempts are haunted by the echo of that other voice. This evocation of alterity is, therefore, not achieved in renouncing description but rather in a commitment to the realist art of description and mimesis which in its own excess marks out its inadequacy and so constitutes the space of difference that Spencer perhaps alludes to.

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